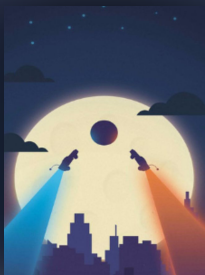




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Roar of the engine



rocketleague

450 10 22

Chapter 1 by Joakim

I put on my gloves.

I walked over to my rocket powered car. I listened to buzz of the crowd.

It was finally time.

Chapter 2 by Líneas&Doublespeak



The blistering sun beat down on the sand. My hair was damp between my skull and my helmet. Other rocket racers didn't bother with such frivolous things as safety, but I had a name to live up to and a face to maintain. "The Handsome Face of Rocket Racing" they called me, and taking an errant chunk of metal to the face would not be good for my personal brand, or so my manager told me.

A bikini-clad girl held open the gleaming silver door of my DOX, she was beautiful, and her smile was wide, but I could see the discomfort in her eyes as her feet sank down into the scorching sand and the unforgiving Saharan light punished her skin more with every passing second.

"Thanks, darling," I said, flashing her a smile. "I'll see you in the winner's lounge!" She giggled, a force little finger that made my chest jerk ever so slightly. I lowered myself into the driver's seat, my hands finding the controls. I began to walk seductively through the shifting sand back to the safety and shade of the race centre.

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From inside the protected, transparent cocoon the roar of the crowd came through dull, as if I was listening to one of those old football games on the vidscreen. Sport sure was boring back in the 21st century. I can see the other competitors urging their rides into action. Most of them were big, hulking brutes that moved like an air shuttle but hit like a thousand plasma cannons.

I turned the ignition on and my Desert Overture Ten growled into life, a low hum that masked the true power lying in those rear rocket shafts. She was a marvel to behold, and I still couldn't believe that she was mine. Sleek and silver, the car's glinting coat caught the eye as the light danced off it and dazzled my competitors as I veered round obstacles ahead of them. "A shining smile, should have a shining car," my manager had said when she gave me it.

I put my foot in position over the pedals, I flexed my fingers around the wheel, curling them back around the thick black ring as tightly as possible and took a deep breath. I breathe in... The lights show red... Breathe out... Red... Breathe In... ... Yellow... ... Breathe out...

...

...

...

Green.

Chapter 3 by Harlander



"And they're off! You can almost feel the G forces from here, folks! The Desert Overture Ten is taking an early lead, but Rex Rexley in his Blueshift G is close behind!"

The race commentary crackled out through speakers as Helmut Gneist watched the start via telescreen. It was his first time up in the tall, air-conditioned spirebox where the VIPs gathered, and, frankly, he wasn't all that comfortable. His hair still stuck up at every angle, and his crumpled shirt and slacks stood out among the tuxedos and ballgowns of the other guests.

Big Tony nudged him with a ham-hock-sized elbow. "It's all prepared, right? The DOX is gonna take a spill in the final lap?" the huge man whispered into Helmut's ear.

He nodded. Everything was ready, and maybe he'd finally found from under the mob debts that'd been hanging over his head.

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Chapter 4 by Intellikat

"Excuse me."

Helmut rose and went to the side bar where we poured himself some blue-tinted skrill juice. Big Tony and the five other VIPs watched his movements, and he tried to steady his hand as he drank back the sharp-tasting liquid in one mighty gulp. He desperately wanted to step from the spire box to breathe in at least the hot freshness of the desert air. He thought of his wife and his child, then returned to his place beside Big Tony.

"Into the second lap now and the Desert Overture Ten is looking absolutely pinned! If he can hold onto this pace for the next two laps, we're looking at our overall series winner this season folks! Handsome... and skilled he is!"

From within my silver shell I was oblivious to the drama that would play out in the next five minutes. My thoughts were only on holding my lead. This was the most important race of my career. This was my move to top podium.

My pit crew popped a bottle of Chiampar early as I roared through into the final lap; the checkered flag whipping overhead. I was a good three seconds in the lead, which in rocket racing was a gap interminable. I remember the calm and the focus in that final stretch. There was nothing that could stop me now.

And then an explosion.

A violent wrenching motion;

And I blacked out.

When I came to I was lying in the sand, my harness bag having inflated and ejected me properly. Two paramedics were at my side. Smoke was rising from the twisted wreck of my DOX, which I could see clearly some distance away. The desert sun was burning my eyes.

I stripped my right hand of its glove and raised it to my face, but a paramedic held me back. I pushed him off and felt for my cheekbone, which felt hot and sore.

There was nothing there.

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Chapter 5 by Dan Ramadan

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It was unusually quiet in the workshop of the Desert Overture Ten; the whole crew was silently staring at the charred remains of the rocket.

The silence was interrupted by the appearance of an elderly woman in a rumpled suit office. "Stella, how is he?" Fat Alex, head of the crew went to the manager and pushed his chair to her. "Thanks, Alex. He is weak, but eager to return to the track. Honestly, I did not expect such energy from him. He demanded that I took a picture and show you a photo," she forced a smile, falling into a chair, and took the phone.

The whole crew slowly surrounded Stella, and looked at the picture.

"My God," Alex said quietly. On the picture Stella was standing next to her protégé's bed. The upper part of the right half of his face was bandaged. A strange expression distorted his face. That was his snow-white smile once. Only the left side of his mouth smiled, and it looked more like a horrible grimace.

"Well, what do you think, Stella?" Alex asked after a long silence, "Will there be a crew for him to come back?"

"I don't know Alex," Stella sighed, "You've seen the photo. We can gain popularity due to sympathy, but he has a well-established image. He is the Handsome. People idolize Prince Charming, not the Beast. In any case, the next few months will be difficult."

Stella looked around and raised her voice, "If anyone of you wants to go to another crew, I will not hold you."

The crew buzzed indignantly. But one crew member was silent. When this man saw the picture his own face twitched, as if someone had hurt him. He resolutely went over to Stella and handed her the sheet. "This is the statement of resignation. I'm leaving. Not to another crew. From this business," said Helmut Gneist and silently left the room.

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